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Gender, Natural Resources, and the Social Economy of Northern Canada

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Over the past several decades the management of natural resources in the Canadian north has undergone considerable change. Once solely under the purview of state administrators, responsibility is now being shared increasingly with those who are most dependent on the continued availability of the resource(s). Referred to generally as co-management, these systems of joint authority have evolved from informal agreements made between local resource users and district managers into complex decision and policy-making bureaucracies now responsible for the management of lands, forests, fisheries, and wildlife resources. Viewed by some as a belated recognition of the knowledge and wisdom of indigenous peoples, co-management is being heralded as an emergent intellectual tradition that can be used to guide the stewardship of natural resources into the future. Beyond its role in land and resource management, co-management has also been endorsed as a potential means by which to resolve longstanding conflicts between indigenous peoples and state governments (e.g., Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). With a range of institutional authority, co-management regimes are not only changing the way in which lands and resources are being managed, but are also restructuring indigenous-state relations more broadly.

While ethnicity has long been recognized as a decisive factor in the negotiation and formation resource co-management arrangements, issues of gender have received little to no attention in the evaluation of co-management in Canada's north. This is surprising given the limited participation of women on northern co-management boards. The exclusion of women on co-management boards is significant given that indigenous men and women have very different site-specific knowledge, have very different species-specific knowledge, and may have fundamentally different priorities with regards to the use and development of natural resources. In this paper the current level of female representation on Canada's northern co-management boards is presented. I then explore what this level of representation may say about the role of women in natural resource management specifically, and what impact might this have on northern public policy, both now and in the future. It is argued that the exclusion of women from northern co-management boards has: 1) reinforced the attitude that land and resource management is not a 'women's issue'; 2) precludes women from acquiring necessary experience to fill appointed or elected positions within communities or governments, thereby promoting male elitism in northern governance; 3) threatens women's livelihoods as part of the 'modernization' process; and 4) provides only a partial or unreliable information base for policy makers to make decisions. Thus despite the potential benefits of co-management, gender-blind interventions are having gendered consequences for women and public policy in Canada's north.